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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended to help parents understand standards and the reasoning behind the standards movement. The booklet is part of the "Council for Basic Education Standards for Excellence in Education" project, a multiyear effort to provide parents, educators, and the general public with a better understanding of how standards are used to evaluate and improve schooling in the United States. It examines the role of standards in the schools and why standards are important. The document emphasizes the importance of parents learning what standards are taught in their schools and becoming involved in evaluating and implementing such standards. Parent involvement is presented as a crucial element in student achievement; once parents begin to understand the world of standards and feel more comfortable navigating it, they will push for even higher standards. The document stresses the need to provide opportunities for students to learn and to ensure that the learning environment is conducive to learning and that teachers are well-prepared and fully qualified for the job. It states that standards provide parents a point of entry into an often confusing school system and that standards derive their strength from their specificity and applicability. (RJM)

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A Parent's Guide to

Understanding Academic Standards

by Lauren Greene

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Standards for Excellence in Education

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Council for Basic Education
An Independent Voice for Educational Excellence

A national advocate for high standards in K-12 education

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Introduction

One goal nearly all parents share is to ensure that their children receive a good education. Most parents understand how important education is to their children's future happiness and productivity, especially in today's high-tech, information-based economy. We realize that times have changed from our school days, that our children will hold many different jobs throughout their working lives, and that the need to upgrade skills will be ever present. To succeed, today's students must be eager to accept the challenges and rewards of learning throughout their lives.

But what does it mean to have a "good" education in this day and age? We know the basics—the "three R's"—are important. We sense that an understanding of our past, through history, brings perspective. We know that science and technology seep into our everyday lives in countless ways, that geography and foreign languages help us to navigate our increasingly interdependent world, and that civics helps us to understand our place and responsibilities in it. We know that the arts in all their various forms enrich our lives, helping us to think broadly, boldly, and creatively.

Reading and writing, mathematics and science, history and geography, literature and the arts—these subjects still form the essence of what we understand might encompass an appropriate education for our children. Yet how different it all seems from when we were in school. This realization is not surprising, given the last decade and a half of school reform in this country, a movement that has created a deluge of reports and research intended to make our schools better and our students more competitive in the international arena. From the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, to the unprecedented setting in 1990 of *national* education goals for all of America's students, the school reform movement has so permeated the culture of schooling in the United States that it's hard to imagine a time when schools were not under such scrutiny, when the stakes were not so high.

Perhaps nowhere is school reform's imprint more evident than in the world of academic standards, a term often quoted, but little understood. In fact, educators today no longer speak simply of school reform, but rather of *standards-driven* school reform. As a parent, you might have heard or read something about standards but aren't sure exactly what they are. More important, you might not understand what they mean for your own child's education and growth as a

learner. Many experts contend that high standards are the key to school reform and are essential to assessing the effectiveness of any school improvement effort. But the picture is more complex, of course—improving our schools involves many interrelated elements. It does appear, however, that standards are here to stay, and that they do make a difference. But what are they? Where did they come from? What do they mean to your child's education? What is your role as a parent in helping your child meet these standards?

We hope this guide, which is part of the Council for Basic Education's Standards for Excellence in Education (SEE) project, will help to answer those questions. The SEE project is a multiyear effort to provide parents, educators, and the general public with a better understanding of how standards are used to evaluate and improve schooling in the United States. The project's goal is to focus attention on the knowledge and skills that are most important for all American students to learn. The centerpiece of this effort is the compilation (mostly from national standards documents) and refinement of a set of standards for each of the eight subject areas of the liberal arts: mathematics, science, history, civics, geography, English, foreign languages, and the arts.

The SEE standards and accompanying materials have been informed by extensive work carried out by national professional associations with expertise in the various subject areas. They are intended to provide a context and points of reference for educators, parents, and other citizens interested in gauging and analyzing the standards employed in their own communities. They can also be used to aid in the development of state or local standards. Currently there exist no uniform sets of standards to be imposed on a national scale (the national standards are all voluntary). However, you will probably find that to a significant degree, state and local efforts to develop standards for student learning have been influenced by the work of national subject area specialists.

Key Terms In Standards-Based School Reform

Content standards: Statements that define expectations for students in terms of knowledge and skills. They identify what students are expected to learn in the various subjects as part of a good education. Content standards provide details for more general, abstract educational goals by specifying what thinking and performing capabilities students should master and what knowledge they should possess.

Learning benchmarks: Points of reference used to gauge the progress of students toward meeting content standards, usually provided in terms of a grade level. Learning benchmarks give an idea of what students are expected to learn by a certain point in their schooling, without being so specific that they ignore variations in individual student progress or in the scope and sequence of curricular offerings.

Curriculum: The description of how and what students will actually be taught in the relevant course(s) to achieve the objectives described in the content standards. The curriculum normally includes lesson plans or outlines, primary source materials, textbooks, videos, lectures, and other sources of information.

Performance standards: A description of the kind of mastery students are supposed to achieve, normally given in connection with a content standard. Content standards identify something to be learned; performance standards identify how well students are supposed to learn it. Performance standards sometimes identify more than one level of achievement for a content standard, and label each level accordingly (for example, basic, proficient, advanced).

Opportunity-to-learn standards: Descriptions of the nature and quality of the educational experiences and resources that educators should make available to students. In standards-based reform, opportunity-to-learn standards measure what the education system does to enable students to meet the expectations set by the content and performance standards.

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One thing we can say definitely say about standards is that there are a lot of them. Documents listing them are often weighty and thick and thus may intimidate the lay reader, not to mention educators themselves. Part of SEE's purpose is to trim standards down to a manageable quantity. The original documents are full of terms like "benchmarks," "competencies," and "curricula"; to complicate things even further, there are multiple kinds of standards. Included in this guide is a glossary of terms we hope you will find helpful in steering your way through the standards environment.

The Role of Standards in Our Schools

The first two recommendations in the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, considered by many to be America's long overdue wake-up call warning of deficiencies in our schools, are (1) strengthening the content of the core curriculum and (2) raising expectations using measurable standards. States and school districts responded to this report by focusing greater attention and resources on promoting excellence in education through such measures as tougher graduation requirements and higher teacher salaries.

It was not until the decade of the nineties, however, that standards became a driving force behind the engine of school reform. In early 1990, President Bush and 50 state governors declared a set of six education goals designed to improve student achievement by the year 2000. These "National Education Goals" were later expanded to eight and adopted by Congress in 1994, as part of "Goals 2000: Educate America Act." The third goal reads as follows:

> By the year 2000, students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in the modern economy.

This goal set the stage for standards-based school reform, as educators and policy makers at all levels endeavored to set forth clear content standards for students' knowledge and skills and benchmarks for measuring student progress toward achieving those content standards. After much deliberation, groups like the National Academy of Sciences, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the International Reading Association followed the

lead of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics by undertaking projects to develop content standards. In turn, these "national" standards have been used as models by local educators developing standards for schools in their districts.

Standards for Excellence in Education and the accompanying guides offer the general public a central resource where they can turn to find information that will help them analyze developments in their own schools. It is important to remember that as yet not every school district has developed its own set of formal content standards and learning benchmarks. Chances are, however, that work is under way in your state or district or both to put standards in place. Nearly every state is in the process of either writing standards or implementing them. School districts across the country are working now to adapt national and state standards for their schools. At the least, school districts will have curriculum statements in the main subject areas for each grade level that parents can consult to see what knowledge and skills are emphasized.

Parents can expect, then, to have some form of standards in place or in progress for their child's school. These standards may be driven by national goals, state requirements, local school improvement efforts, or most likely, a combination of all three. Whatever the source, standards will figure prominently in what our children learn and how they will be expected to demonstrate that knowledge.

Why Standards Are Important

At the heart of standards-based school reform lies the principle that children learn better when they know what is expected of them and when they are expected to achieve at high levels. In the past, low expectations have, not surprisingly, resulted in poor performance, with many young people moving through the system, even graduating, without mastery of essential knowledge and skills. Currently, many students do not really have to try particularly hard in school, often doing the minimum expected of them. When too little is expected of students in our schools, they are set up for failure later on when they enter the workplace. While it may seem reasonable to expect that teachers and administrators would have established clear and challenging standards for what students should know and be able to do, this has not always been the case. The result has been uneven student performance and confusion over goals.

Standards-based school reform seeks to change that picture, first by affirming that a high achievement level for *all* students, regardless of their backgrounds, is a goal both worthy and attainable. Second, standards are expected to provide the public—including students and teachers themselves—with much-needed clarity about what students should be learning. Third, standards and accompanying benchmarks create a common basis upon which student learning, progress, and achievement can be assessed. The ultimate goals of standards are to raise performance levels for all students and to provide communities with a much clearer picture of the effectiveness of the education their schools provide.

Implementing content standards in a particular district means that every school will have the same high expectations in the major subject areas for all its students, no matter which school a child attends or which teacher a child might have. Individual schools and teachers may help students meet the standards in different ways, using a variety of teaching strategies and resources, but the specific knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire are consistent and clearly defined.

Standards hold great potential to improve the quality of education. High expectations can serve to empower and energize students to advance their own learning, and expand teachers', students', and parents' understanding of what is not only desirable, but indeed possible, to achieve. Clear standards for learning, publicly shared, can help unite teachers, principals, and administrators with the larger community (especially parents) in the pursuit of mutual goals for student learning. And standards provide a much-needed focus and common vocabulary that make it easier for teachers and parents to work together, each bringing their own important perspectives to the dialogue and forging for parents a closer connection to their child's learning.

What Parents Can Do

While standards can provide a focus for constructive discussions among parents, teachers, and principals about student learning, they are at the same time an imposing prospect to tackle and absorb. The standards-based reform environment is complex, even for teachers, but parents should not be deterred. We know by now that parents cannot simply rely on grades to understand the quality of their child's education. Clear content standards and learning benchmarks finally offer

parents the sort of guidance they need to make informed judgments about the effectiveness of their local schools and their own child's performance.

It is more than mere rhetoric to assert that parents are their children's first teachers and their most crucial partners in learning. Even the United States Congress recognized the pivotal role parents play in realizing the nation's education goals when it articulated objectives for parent participation (see sidebar). It is clear from research and from the experience of classroom teachers that students learn more in school when their parents are involved in the process and are supportive of the school and its values.

Standards-based reform offers parents the opportunity to elevate their interaction with their child's schooling to a more meaningful, substantive level. Linda Darling-Hammond, co-director of the National Center for Restructuring Schools, Education, and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, put the matter this way:

> When parent engagement extends beyond the bake sale and when students and their work are at the center of the conversation, teachers and parents can focus together on how children are learning. Both can offer observations about students' strategies, paces, and styles of learning; their different strengths and experiences; the ways they express what they know; and the kinds of teaching strategies effective for them. When teachers' insights are supported by parents' insights, teachers can more easily connect students' experiences to curriculum goals. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.145)

We know that achievement increases when more families and parents are engaged in the process. We know, too, that the key to improving academic performance is helping both students and parents know exactly what is expected of them. But in practice, how might this be achieved?

There are at least two dimensions to parental involvement in standards-based reform. Keep in mind that standards-based reform is still a relatively new phenomenon for schools, and parental roles have yet to be clearly defined. Many districts are

National Education Goal #8

Parent Participation. By the year 2000, every school shall promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

The objectives of this goal are that

- Every state will develop policies to assist local schools and local educational agencies to establish programs for increasing partnerships that respond to the varying needs of parents and the home, including parents of children who are disadvantaged or bilingual, or parents of children with disabilities.
- Every school will actively engage parents and families in a partnership which supports the academic work of children at home and shared educational decision-making at schools.
- Parents and families will help to ensure that schools are adequately supported and will hold schools and teachers to high standards of accountability.

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working now, through parent leadership institutes and other means, to determine what kind of involvement is needed in this new environment and how parent involvement in local schools might be increased.

Some parents can become involved on a large scale, helping schools not only to formulate standards, but also to monitor their implementation and effectiveness on an ongoing basis. This level of involvement would require serving on committees and organizing ways to tell other parents about standards. Where districts have not yet formally adopted standards, parents have a great opportunity to get involved at the grass-roots level. In Hamilton County, Tennessee, for example, educators enlisted the involvement of more than 180 community members—including parents, business leaders, and higher education representatives—to make sure that the county adopted standards that represented the priorities of their community. Such participation is essential, but it is not for every parent. All parents, however, need to be involved at the individual level, working with their own child and their child's teachers to advance the learning goals embodied in the district's content and performance standards. But how can you do that?

First, become informed. A good initial step would be to review *Standards for Excellence in Education,* which offers parents a reference point for reviewing their own district's standards in each subject.

Second, your school or school district should be able to provide you with, or at least have available for loan or on-site review, the standards operating in your district. They might be an intimidatingly thick volume, but remember, as a parent, you don't have to memorize each and every standard for all the benchmark grade levels. At this stage, it is enough to familiarize yourself with the materials, so your district's content standards and learning benchmarks don't seem like a foreign language.

Parents must have an overall conception of standards if they are to communicate constructively with teachers and other school personnel about student achievement and act effectively on their children's behalf. Once you have a better sense of the context in which your child is now learning, you should feel more comfortable discussing specific standards with your child's teacher and how you can help your child achieve them.

There are, of course, tried-and-true principles for all parents that the recent emphasis on standards has brought to the fore. "Children need to know that working hard in school is important and that they must devote themselves to their education. The adults in their lives—their family and teachers—must continually reinforce the value of learning, of investing in one's mind and skills. But this lesson cannot be taught unless adults believe it" (Ravitch, 1995, p.178). Strategies parents can pursue to help their children at home include reading to them daily and discussing current events; monitoring homework assignments; providing an abundance of learning resources like books, magazines, and maps; visiting museums and libraries; attending concerts and plays; taking walks with their children, observing the environment and asking questions along the way; encouraging activities that involve problem solving; and guiding children in the productive use of free time, including monitoring and limiting television viewing and use of the Internet. Establishing a learning-rich environment for a child at home is crucial to the success of any standards-based effort to improve schools.

There are also many ways for parents to enhance their level of engagement in the classroom itself. Ideally, teachers will seek to make connections with parents through notes, phone calls, and invitations to participate in classroom activities. Parents can volunteer their time in a variety of ways—as reading tutors or by helping in the classroom with special projects, for example. Spending time in their child's classroom provides parents with valuable insights into their own child's learning experiences.

The parent-teacher conference is another way to stay in touch. These conferences are a long-standing tradition, but how might they be improved in the new standards environment? When these occasions are true *conversations* rather than one-sided reports, both parties can offer useful perspectives on the student's educational growth. In a climate of clear expectations and meaningful standards for learning, parents should be able to ask more specific questions about their child's learning, progress, and achievement.

There are, then, numerous ways that parents can become more constructively involved in their children's learning. Everyone agrees that for standards-based reform to succeed, parents must be true partners in the enterprise.

The School-Parent Connection

Standards-based reform depends heavily upon establishing an open and informed climate of communication between the school and its encompassing community. This means that schools must be especially attentive to the ways in which they engage parents and encourage their participation.

To foster and sustain parental involvement, schools should have a system of periodic self-review. The following questions from the School Change and Inquiry Program in Chicago are a few that schools and parents might consider:

- What information do parents receive about their child's progress in school? How do they receive it? What dialogue is possible?
- How much information do they receive about standards, the curriculum, or other aspects of school life? How do they get this information?
- What arrangements are there for parents to talk with a teacher, guidance counselor, or principal about the achievements or difficulties of their child?
- Is there an organization or association of parents? Is it representative of the range of parents at the school? How many of the activities have to do with learning?

These questions can serve as a useful starting point for evaluating and improving parents' efforts to engage in a particular school. Also useful may be these five key features of effective home-school links identified by researchers at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland:

- Parents play an active part in their children's learning.
- Parents are confident that problems will be dealt with and feedback given.
- The school provides for the social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of students.
- Parent-teacher meetings are useful and productive.
- Student progress is monitored and shared with parents on a regular basis.

Both formal and informal ways for parents to share their thoughts and exchange ideas about the standards process should be made available, through existing parent-teacher organizations and groups like Parents as Educational Partners, the School Site Council, or their equivalents. These forums should be

as inclusive as possible, engaging working parents, those who might have limited English skills, and others traditionally underrepresented. All parents need to feel part of the school, and be reassured that their children are receiving the fullest opportunities to learn.

Standards and Student Work

Once parents begin to understand the world of standards and feel more comfortable navigating it, they will want something beyond the more general guidance already mentioned here. They will want specific directions as to how they can best help their child achieve identified standards.

Student proficiencies will be expressed in a variety of ways, ranging from hands-on projects to critical essays. Parents are likely to feel more comfortable with some subjects than others. Also, they may be unsure about how to assess a particular piece of their child's work in relation to the learning benchmark for the relevant content standard. For example, say one of your district's content standards for English language arts is to *write effectively for different purposes and audiences.* While you might feel pretty confident judging whether your child can compose a sentence and organize a paragraph, determining whether your twelfth grader's persuasive essay meets the benchmark is more difficult to assess.

Consider this standard for mathematics: *Students are able to use reasoning to construct and judge the validity of arguments in mathematics and its applications.* Is there any way to reasonably expect a parent to make an informed judgment about whether their child meets this standard? The benchmarks for that standard provide some guidance. For example, by the end of grade four, students should be able to justify their answers and the steps taken to solve problems using manipulatives and physical models. In the end, however, it will be from the exploration of student work that teachers, parents, and students will be able to monitor learning, progress, and achievement.

In many respects, it is the teacher's job to make these judgments. But parents should not be afraid to ask the teacher for suggestions when they are concerned about their child's progress or wish to help him or her strengthen skills. The connection between parents, standards, and student work is still relatively uncharted territory, but parents certainly do have an important role to play. It is a role that continues as their child moves into middle school and high school, when learning tasks become more demanding and complex.

Some Important Points to Remember About Standards

- Shared expectations for learning, through standards, can make students' education more coherent by coordinating teaching, learning, and testing.
- Content standards reflect the public's view of society's purposes for schooling. Therefore, the standards-setting process should allow for participation by the public, including parents, educators, and the business community.
- Content standards should be clear and usable. They should guide—not constrict—teaching and learning.
- Content standards do not determine the curriculum, nor do they represent a fixed unit of class time. How and when a class operates are not as important as whether students are reaching the standards. What is important is that all children reach high levels of learning.
- Not all students will reach benchmarks at the same time. Some students may need more assistance. While the old system essentially gave up on underachieving students by expecting less of them, a standards-based system establishes high expectations for all students.
- Standards provide many ways for students to show their abilities. Beyond written exams, students will build portfolios and undertake projects to show their progress toward meeting standards.
- It is important to resist the temptation to focus only on your child's achievement. Support your child's progress, as well as achievement, for progress is the key to achievement.

If a school district has established content standards and benchmarks, then its schools should be able to provide parents with samples of student work for various levels of performance. The samples might include work that doesn't quite meet the standard, work that meets it, and work that exceeds it. Some districts may identify specific levels of performance for an individual standard, especially for the upper grades. For example, work could be categorized as "basic," "proficient," or "advanced."

Samples of student work provide concrete meaning to the words in a given standard, but these samples cannot be limited solely to written work. Through video or other means, the whole range of student work must be portrayed. Such prototypes are especially authentic and meaningful when drawn from a diverse range of actual student work.

Workshops and other forums should be organized so both parents and teachers can learn to explore and evaluate student work collaboratively and effectively. Students themselves should be part of this process of analysis and critique, as it provides a valuable extension of their own learning.

Providing Opportunities to Learn

It is important for parents to remember that the act of writing and implementing standards in a school district is not enough to ensure that all students will achieve them, and that their child's education will, de facto, be improved. In fact, setting standards marks only the *beginning* of the job. Schools have an essential obligation to back up their standards-setting efforts with the extra resources and attention inevitably required for students to succeed at high levels. Parents, likewise, must monitor on an ongoing basis the effectiveness of their child's school in helping students meet the new standards.

Parents should consider school funding and whether it is enough to support the higher levels of learning required by content and performance standards. Another issue to consider is the preparation of teachers hired by the district. In some districts, many

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teachers teach outside their specialty. For standards to work, students must have access to well-prepared, fully qualified teachers. Class sizes cannot be too large, and materials and equipment—such as textbooks, computers, and laboratories—must be available and up-to-date. And certainly, underpinning all standards efforts must be the acknowledgment that some students will need extra help. These are just a few of the elements that must be in place in each and every school before standards can deliver on their promise.

Parents, then, must hold schools accountable for results in this new environment of standards-based reform. Yet schools cannot do the job alone. Parents must understand that it is no longer "business as usual" when it comes to their own involvement, not only with the school, but with their child's learning. They must be informed about, prepared for, and ultimately supportive of this new partnership for learning. It is a pact that demands parents' full attention and participation. Without their active involvement, standards-driven reform is an effort destined to fall short of expectations.

Conclusion

In her recent book, *The Right to Learn,* Linda Darling-Hammond notes that "what parents most need and most want are closer connections to the learning process for their individual child" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.145). Today's standards-setting efforts offer a way to make those closer connections by offering much-needed clarity for all stakeholders about the goals and purposes of education in the twenty-first century. As standards and benchmarks are implemented, everyone involved in a child's education—student, parents, principal, teachers, superintendent, and the larger community—will clearly understand the critical importance of high expectations for learning and what those expectations are.

Standards provide a point of entry into an often confusing school system for puzzled parents who—as we all do—wish for their child to succeed. Standards bring genuine and concrete meaning to the notion of an effective education, and they even the playing field by asserting, even expecting, that all students can achieve at high levels. The implications of this assertion cannot be overstated. Notions of "grade inflation" and "social promotion" should become anachronisms in a revitalized culture of schooling that insists that everyone can and will achieve.

The value of content standards depends both on what they say students should learn and on how they are used to help students learn it. Creating and adopting standards are important steps, but real improvement in education comes when standards are used to shape the actual educational experiences of students. Only if teachers and the public regularly inquire as to whether standards are being used effectively do they offer hope of improving education.

While at first blush standards may seem overwhelmingly complex, parents need to remember that much of the standards' strength derives from their specificity. No longer are students expected to simply "read and write." They must read with comprehension and write with clarity and meaning. Contexts and interrelationships among the various subjects are emphasized. Problem-solving and creativity are demanded. Inevitably, parents will make comparisons with their own school experiences and find that, indeed, education looks far different today. But that is as it should be.

Rather than be intimidated by this new culture of schooling, parents should seize this exceptional opportunity to engage in their child's learning in new and productive ways—as partner, mentor, and friend. The benefits to be reaped from forging such a relationship are many; the costs of not doing so, even greater.

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